

Date: Feb. 28, 2020

To: John Stalvey, Interim Provost

Cc: John Petraitis, Interim Dean, College of Arts and Sciences

From:

Dr. Brian Cook, Associate Professor and Chair, Department of Theatre and Dance;
Prof. Colleen Metzger, Associate Professor, Department of Theatre and Dance

RE: AY20 Expedited Program Review: Optional Program Response to Dean's Recommendation

Program in this review: BA in Theatre

Introduction

Implementing change can move at a glacial pace, and while the Department of Theatre and Dance has been making changes each year to try and raise enrollment and lower costs, it is clear that Interim Dean Petraitis doesn't feel that there has been a dramatic enough change. However, making a hasty, irrational decision by eliminating a department which has significant community support, delivers excellent education, and provides significant value to the university is not an effective solution. As the dean himself acknowledges, the department has recently made significant changes to curriculum to allow students to more swiftly move through the program and to harness more student credit hours from production. Those changes will come into effect this coming fall if we are not deleted and in teach-out mode. We have made the changes, we have a range of potential partnerships that would interest students, and we already have a strong program, which the dean also acknowledges. Instead of elimination, we should be given the opportunity to see how our changes pay off and to pursue the opportunities open to us to create a more sought-after department. We will detail those opportunities below.

Only CAS has utilized the "deletion" designation, where all other colleges recommended programs only be suspended. Further, unlike many programs, our department was not offered any chance to reimagine or alter our program toward cost savings. It is worth considering how the theatre program could survive even through this difficult budget situation, especially considering the praise provided by the dean in his recommendation. We will do so in this document.

Critical (Un)intended Consequences

It is a fact that in deleting this program, the administration is making it impossible for Alaskan students to gain education and training to pursue theatre (or dance) as a career. As the dean specifies, there is no alternative program in the state which offers a full and complete BA in Theatre. This would also significantly impair the other theatre companies in Anchorage and elsewhere.

The most significant consequence is that eliminating this program removes the opportunity for students to create art and tell stories via performance. The dean mentions the low percentage of students who matriculate in with a theatre major, and therefore implies that theatre education is not valuable enough to preserve. However, this metric is far from being a useful number in assessing a program's value. A significant number of UAA students change their major more than once, and a lot of students enter college not knowing at all what they want to study. Those who may be considering theatre also have their heads filled by people telling them that theatre is a bad choice because they'll never get a job. Students entering UAA are all seeking a program that matches who they are and what they want to pursue; that is the essence of selecting a major. For some students, that takes time, and even when they find their passion for theatre, they're not able to major because their parents won't let them or because they're afraid to. We've told our majors numerous times how brave they are to pursue a theatre degree when so many people are telling them lies about the benefits of theatre education.

In our program review document, we outlined very clearly how the belief that a theatre major leads to joblessness is false. There are many jobs in theatre, both within the state and Outside. However, the joblessness belief is self-reinforcing, and so students do not select theatre as a major initially. When they come into contact with our program, and realize the potential for a life-long career, they chose to major in theatre. Our expedited program review listed career options in and out of state, specifically listing all the companies across the state producing work each year. Every one of those theatre companies have UAA theatre alumni at their heart. We are sure you have read many letters of support for our program from them. Without the UAA theatre program to filter professional theater practitioners into local theatre companies, you are not only cutting the only place to study theatre in the state, but may be in turn responsible for the death of other theatre companies in the state.

If this program is deleted, the possibility exists for a time where there will be not enough people with theatre experience in the state to adequately produce theatre, requiring the importation of specialists from outside the state who will only stay here temporarily. With quality theatre education and more theatre students produced in the state, the more they would seek opportunities to create their own companies and hire other UAA grads in Alaska. Anchorage is a large city; it certainly can support a fully-professional theatre that produces only in Anchorage. Our students have the skills and abilities to create such a theatre. More theatre in Alaska means that high school students have experiences with theatre and will be committed to studying it in their home state.

Beyond keeping the arts in Alaska alive, the theater department also helps keep students alive. Theatre is renowned for its therapeutic effects (we in fact listed many scientifically-based facts about the healing power of theatre in our EPR), and many students study theatre because they not only enjoy it, but it helps keep them mentally healthy. In a state where so many people suffer from depression, suicidal impulses, and seasonal affective disorder, participating in and viewing theatre is scientifically proven to bolster a positive attitude. Further, when the deletion was announced two current students announced that "this program has saved my life." We have had numerous students across the years that would say the same thing. Suffering from crippling depression, ADHD or other mental health issues, only their work in theatre was able to help them cope. The loss of theatre as an art form in Anchorage is concerning, the loss of future students because they don't have access to a theatre community is heartbreaking.

Future Partnerships and Program Growth

We mentioned in our EPR that we had been in talks with the Alaska School Activities Association about creating a high school theatre competition as part of the Drama/Debate/Forensics (DDF) state competition. If we were to pursue this, it would not cost the department any extra funds (as ASAA would pay for the costs of the competition), but it would yield greater connection between high school students from all around Alaska and UAA Theatre and Dance. As arts programs are shuttered statewide, it benefits both our program and potential students by keeping theatre in high schools and building a connection between them and our program. We could also apply for grants for our faculty to travel around the state for short theatre workshops. The more interaction we have with high school students, the more they will see theatre at UAA as a viable option.

Perseverance Theatre is under new artistic direction, and they have already reached out to UAA about wanting to collaborate more deeply in future seasons. They are restructuring and have announced a desire to produce more productions in Anchorage and liaise with more local theatres. They have also discussed the idea of renting out the UAA performance spaces for some of their Anchorage season, which would bring both revenue as well as potential new audience members into our theatres. Plus, students would have opportunities to work on professional productions while still at UAA, making the UAA theatre program more attractive to potential students.

A similar collaboration with Momentum Dance Company is also in development, as are ongoing discussions between UAA Theater and Dance faculty and the Performing Arts Center in Anchorage about ways to work together.

Alternative Options

Although we were not given the direction to consider alternative cost-cutting measures, the dean did write that “if the program continues it must find a way to close the gap between what it takes to train the students and the finances it has for that training.” To that end, we offer several suggestions:

1. We believe some short-term changes could help keep costs down to maintain a smaller theatre department until we see how the budget situation turns out long-term and assess if the curriculum changes made within the department will help boost enrollment. One option would be for us to focus mostly on teaching and producing small shows that can directly be tied to a course being offered.
2. Allowing attrition to reduce the budget, as has already been happening. Both our term instructors and our tenure-track scenic design professor and technical director have recently departed. It is likely that we may lose our sole untenured faculty member within the next year.
3. Our faculty could be moved into other departments, and productions could become a club activity that represents a smaller portion of our workloads. Some classes which could continue to be offered are our general education classes (Theatre Appreciation, Dance Appreciation, Introduction to Acting [becoming a GER in Fall 2020], Historical and

Contemporary Drama courses, the Theatre History sequence) along with many of our successful courses like Makeup for the Stage, Theatrical Production Techniques, and many of our capstone (492) courses, including History of Musical Theatre, LGBTQ+ Theatre, Dramaturgy, and Theatre for Social Change.

There are of course more drastic cuts that could be made to our staff, our faculty, and the overall program without deleting it entirely. While those cuts would potentially lower the value of the program to the theatre students, we are more than willing to have a conversation regarding how to maintain the Theatre BA program on a far-reduced budget.

It is detrimental to the state of Alaska to not have a forum for theatre education. Artists want to be educated in Alaska and make art in Alaska. Perhaps currently the budget cannot allow the theatre department to remain as it currently exists, but surely a university with such wise and innovative minds can conceive of another way for theatre education to continue to exist in the state of Alaska. We ask that given the opportunities we have created for our program, that you allow us to continue to exist.